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### **OPINION**

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## **Improvement districts are good for Georgia**

By Sen. Cecil Staton (R-Macon)

How do cities and counties pay for the infrastructure all citizens depend upon? Through taxes, of course. Some fast growing cities and counties with growing tax bases are able to keep up with infrastructure needs. Other less developed and populated counties, however, have difficulty in meeting current infrastructure maintenance needs, much less building new infrastructure that will allow growth, jobs, and economic development.

For this reason, I've authored and sponsored Senate Bill 414, the "Rural Georgia Economic Development Act of 2006." Contrary to sensational and misleading newspaper headlines, this bill does not create private towns or provide developers with the opportunity to take land that they have not paid for. This bill simply provides an alternative way for cities and counties to pay for infrastructure by creating residential community improvement districts.

These districts, used by many other states, provide a way to transfer the cost of new infrastructure to those who use the infrastructure, not current citizens who already are overtaxed. In practical application, if a new subdivision is built, those who choose to live there will voluntarily agree to pay for that infrastructure through an assessment, much like a condo or homeowners fee.

Senate Bill 414 provides for openness and freedom of information from the creation of the district to the dissolution of the district. The districts are prohibited from exercising the powers of condemnation

or eminent domain. All assessments are capped by law. All major contracts are subject to open bidding requirements. And any debt incurred after the fact must be approved by the residents. The managing entity of the district includes representatives from local government entities and ultimately citizens from the district.

For these reasons, Senate Bill 414 is strongly supported by the associations that protect the interests of Georgia's counties and citizens, the Georgia Municipal Association, and the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia. They understand that this provides an important tool for economic development, particularly in our rural areas that desperately need jobs, grocery stores, pharmacies, doctors, and schools.

This bill will benefit precisely those counties that cannot afford to pay the burden of infrastructure costs with their current tax base. With the passage of this law and the agreement of Georgia's citizens through the passage of a constitutional amendment this November, Georgia may join a number of other states around the nation in having a powerful tool for economic growth in rural and disadvantaged areas.

This bill presents a basic lesson in Economics 101, and presents huge opportunities, not just to metro Atlanta, but rural areas all around our state. It has worked in our sister states for 20 years. It will work, here, too.

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*Sen. Cecil Staton of the 18<sup>th</sup> Senate District serves as chairman of the Senate Science and Technology Committee. He may be reached at 404.656.5039 and represents portions of Bibb, Crawford, Houston, Jones and Monroe counties.*